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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 SANTO DOMINGO 007489

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR WHA/CAR-SMITH, WHA/PPC-NOYES, AND DRL/PHD-DAVIS
STATE PASS AID
NSC FOR SHANNON AND MADISON
LABOR FOR ILAB
TREASURY FOR OASIA-LAMONICA
USDOC FOR 4322/ITA/MAC/WH/CARIBBEAN BASIN DIVISION
USDOC FOR 3134/ITA/USFCS/RD/WH

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: DR PGOV PHUM PREL

SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTIONS #10: ASSISTANT SECRETARY NORIEGA MEETS ELECTION BOARD

REF: A. REF: (AO SANTO DOMINGO 7395 (NOTAL)

1B. (B) SANTO DOMINGO 6379 (NOTAL)

11. (U) Following is number 10 in our Dominican presidential election series:

ASSISTANT SECRETARY NORIEGA PLUGS CLEAN ELECTIONS --
DOMINICAN ELECTION BOARD ASSERTS THEY WILL BE

12. (SBU) Summary: Visiting WHA Assistant Secretary Noriega, with the Ambassador and other U.S. officials, called on the three presiding judges of the Dominican Republic's Central Election Board (JCE) December 11. The Assistant Secretary expressed concern about low public confidence in the fairness of the presidential election process and said the USG stood ready to support the JCE's declared goal of ensuring free, fair, transparent, and clean elections, including funding for international election observers. The judges acknowledged that democracy and the JCE's credibility were at stake. They said logistical arrangements for the May 16 voting would be completed this month, and voting abroad would be possible for the first time. The JCE was planning workshops for election officials and university training for poll workers, and was coordinating closely with political parties and civil society. JCE President Luis Arias said international observers would be invited soon, and he welcomed public support and comment on the electoral process by diplomats in country. Paragraph 11 repeats Embassy's request for funding of observers. End summary.

13. (SBU) Visiting Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Noriega on December 11 met with the Dominican Republic's Central Election Board (JCE) Plenary presiding judge Luis Arias, Administrative Chamber presiding judge Nelson Gomez, and Dispute Resolution Chamber presiding judge Salvador Ramos. The Ambassador, DCM Kubiske, WHA/CAR deputy director Smith, WHA executive assistant Friedman, and poloff accompanied the Assistant Secretary.

U.S. Interest

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14. (SBU) Assistant Secretary Noriega expressed concern about the Dominican presidential election process, which is getting underway during chaotic economic and financial circumstances. He noted doubts among many Dominicans about the fairness of the presidential election process. To help counter this low public confidence, he said the USG stood ready to support the JCE's declared goal of ensuring free, fair, transparent, and clean elections, including funding for international election observers. The Assistant Secretary, based on his personal experience in observing elections in various countries, emphasized the JCE's crucial role in organizing an election that is free, fair, clean, and transparent. To build confidence, the JCE should do this in dialogue with the political parties and civil society, which also have responsibilities in ensuring an environment conducive to a credible election.

JCE's Credibility at Stake

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15. (SBU) JCE Plenary presiding judge Arias replied that the Election Board would welcome as many international observers as necessary to achieve that goal. The JCE's interest was to promote democracy, the credibility of institutions including the electoral arrangements, and the personal and professional credibility of the prominent jurists on the JCE. Arias said the JCE would demonstrate its capability and will to ensure a clean and transparent process. Electoral fraud, he asserted, was "an issue of the past." The political parties had permanent representatives to the JCE, and the Board was keeping them informed of every step in the process.

Logistical Preparation Nearly Finished

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16. (SBU) JCE Administrative Chamber judge Gomez said all the arrangements for the election would be completed by the end of December, including agreement with political delegates on the composition of all municipal election boards. Gomez anticipated that from January to April, during the campaign, the JCE would make adjustments to the process based on suggestions from the political parties and non-partisan NGOs (Note: Such as the USAID-supported Participacion Ciudadana. End note.). He said the JCE's computer system would enable announcement of the winner within three to four hours of the closing of the polls, reducing suspicions that arose in the past from extended vote counts. (Comment: Based on historical experience, we doubt that the winner can be determined so quickly. End comment.)

17. (SBU) Gomez described planned fraud-prevention improvements: The hand-written ballot box counts from each polling table would be sealed in plastic to prevent alteration before they are entered in computers, each political party would receive signed copies, and the computer keypunchers would not know which candidate's returns they were entering. Gomez said the JCE had resolved a dispute with the parties and an Election Follow-Up Commission of civil society representatives over the impartiality of the JCE's computer director by appointing a recognized computer expert with no party connections as the general administrator of data processing. (Comment: The JCE and Follow-Up Commission are still negotiating on acceptable job descriptions of these two officials. End comment.)

18. (SBU) Gomez also claimed that, of 5.1 million voters nationwide, 5,053,000 already had valid i.d. cards (cedulas) to enable them to vote, and that new computer equipment being installed at JCE offices would enable the remaining 47,000 voters to obtain their cedulas. (Comment: Our non-government contacts have told us that thousands of the existing i.d. cards have errors that could pose obstacles to voters on election day. The JCE has previously said publicly and privately that it is taking corrective measures. End comment.) For the longer run, President Mejia has approved a JCE proposal to request assistance from international financial institutions to modernize the entire Dominican i.d. card system, to eliminate chronic problems. The JCE estimates this project will require 10-12 million U.S. dollars. The JCE's tentatively approved budget, about 1.6 billion pesos of 1.8 billion requested, deletes funding for civil registry modernization.

Resolving Election Disputes

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19. (SBU) Dispute Resolution Chamber judge Ramos described the JCE's plans to train local election officials and poll workers, to reduce potential disagreements over election results. The training is to include workshops for judges in the municipal election boards, on dispute resolution and administration of resources, and courses provided by universities and a USAID-supported NGO for poll workers. Also to reduce problems with the returns, universities are collaborating with the JCE to recruit 75,000 poll workers with better educational qualifications than in the past. Arias and Ramos told us the JCE has been fulfilling its duties in resolving disputes in the political parties' nomination process. Since last March, Ramos and his colleagues have issued more than a dozen decisions on intra-party conflicts, based on each party's statutes and regulations. The JCE expects to rule soon on the widening split among competing candidates in the ruling Dominican Revolutionary Party - PRD (Ref A). (Note: The JCE has not yet announced a decision. End note.) Ramos said the JCE publishes the text of all its rulings, including the legal basis for each decision.

Voting of Dominicans Abroad

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10. (SBU) Judge Gomez explained that, for the first time, Dominicans living abroad would be entitled to vote. Voting centers were being set up in Puerto Rico, New York City, New Jersey, the Boston area, Miami, and Tampa, as well as in Canada, Venezuela, and Spain. Some 26,000 expatriate Dominicans were already registered. The JCE was set to begin an advertising campaign to increase that number and had extended the registration deadline at those locations until January 16. Gomez expressed confidence that the newly established voting arrangements abroad would work smoothly.

International Observers

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11. (SBU) Judge Arias said international observers would be invited soon, and he welcomed public support and comment on the electoral process by diplomats posted in the Dominican

Republic. Gomez said the JCE had approached "several countries" and the OAS and UN about sending observers or technical assistance. (Comment: Per Ref B, Embassy has requested funding from the Department to support proposed observer missions from NDI, IFES, and possibly the Carter Center and the OAS. Some of these entities have proposed an observer presence beginning in January or February to cover the entire electoral process, a point that our Dominican political and non-government contacts have strongly recommended. Embassy will take full and appropriate advantage of Arias's invitation to local diplomats. End comment.)

¶12. (U) This message was not reviewed by Assistant Secretary Noriega.
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